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Contesting the City: the Politics of Citizenship in English Towns, 1250-1530

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James Davis

Christian Liddy argues that the notion of a 'citizen' was not the preserve of abstract medieval thinking, based on classical modes, but a living concept that had pervaded urban life since the 13th century. It was evident in residents' writings, speech, and actions. This also meant that citizenship was mutable and contestable in its ideas and practices. Indeed, the central theme of *Contesting the City* is that citizenship was as much as basis for urban tension and conflict as it was as means to embody commonality. Differing perceptions of identity and responsibility were bound up in how citizenship was interpreted within civic politics.

From the outset, Liddy suggests that historians tend to concentrate too much on top-down political processes, viewing urban politics primarily through the aims of the ruling elite. A preoccupation with the development of urban oligarchy perhaps means that there are too many assumptions about the chronology of oligarchy's emergence and its dominance. The corrective proposed here is to consider in more detail the active response of the broader urban population; how they absorbed public declarations and reacted to civic rules. Liddy does not ultimately challenge the existing historiography on the trajectory of oligarchy in English towns.⁽¹⁾ He agrees that debates about urban citizenship were most intense in the later 15th and early 16th centuries, when oligarchic tendencies prevailed and urban constitutions became uncompromising (pp. 210–11). Nevertheless, Liddy advocates a more long-term, participatory model of civic politics that was

not all about consensual norms, such as the common good, but about practices based upon divergent views about political engagement and legitimacy. These occasionally led to conflict. This is not necessarily a new insight, but the detailed analysis and evidence provides an impressive foreground. *Contesting the City* is about everyday urban politics and what it meant to be a citizen. Liddy suggests that a 'reassessment of the institution of urban citizenship has major implications for our understanding of urban politics in late medieval England' (p. 24).

This book is unashamedly a study of the larger urban conurbations with their particular forms of urban self-government. The evidential focus is thus on the five largest English cities of Bristol, Coventry, London, Norwich and York, alongside a conscious effort to draw ideological parallels with continental European cities. Whether there was a transmission of ideas between these urban centres is less clear. Liddy is keen to emphasise 'a native tradition of urban citizenship' (p. 2), but he also suggests that the English experience was comparable to European counterparts. Political conflict is a central theme in the book, building upon recent work by Patrick Lantschner for Italy and the Low Countries, but reconfiguring such ideas for an English context.[\(2\)](#)

The documents of urban governance are examined in detail, with a particular emphasis on oaths, ordinances, town customs and written constitutions. A range of spatial, temporal and material approaches provide new perspectives on our understanding of town government. In particular, close attention is paid to the mechanics and meaning of freemen oaths, civic proclamations and constitutional documents and this elicits fresh insight into how these aroused differing interpretations about the values of citizenship. The privileges and rights of citizenship were undoubtedly guarded assertively, both against internal corruption and external competition. Liddy concisely outlines the traditional framework for our understanding of such rights, including the characteristics of inclusivity and exclusivity. However, his underlying argument is perhaps summarised best as: 'cities were confronted with the challenge of reconciling the political equality of all citizens with the idea that some citizens were more equal than others' (p. 96-7). In 1414, the *probi homines* of Norwich 'complained about the pretensions of ordinary citizens' (p. 98), and certainly the wider citizenry continually found ways to challenge such hierarchy and openly voice their political opinions.

Chapter two examines the malleability of concepts of citizenship through the freeman's oath. Such oaths outlined the responsibilities and liabilities of citizenship, as embodied in 'lot and scot', and reminded them of the exclusivity of their rights, which were to be safeguarded. They also encapsulated the common values and identity of citizenship, linked to respectable behaviour commensurate with this status. The oath was partly a public act of loyalty to the ruling elite but also about allegiance to the broader community of urban citizens. Liddy suggests that 'each promise admitted the fragility of civic power' (p. 29). Towns were ruled only with the backing of the citizenry even as they swore an oath to be loyal. The chapter clearly highlights some of the paradoxes involved in the oath, which emphasised commonalty and mutuality while also reinforcing the hierarchy of civic governance and *probi homines*. Liddy suggests that the differentiation inferred upon office-holders was temporary, since obedience only lasted as long as they were in office. Ultimately, what bonded citizens together, embedded in ideas of the corporate body of the city, was stronger than any divisions caused by the means of governance. However, he also draws our attention to points of tension between prominent officials and the bulk of the citizens, such as the sale of the franchise for profit, which suggested differences in outlook.

Liddy highlights the extent to which citizenship and craft membership were viewed as synonymous, with craft sponsorship often a requirement for entry to the former, attesting to the individual's aptitude and reputation. There was also a close link between the citizen and shopkeeper, highlighted by the rights to retail freely; a specific punishment for errant citizens was the barring of windows as accompaniment to their loss of the franchise. Liddy thus recognises the economic and commercial benefits of citizenship, but the book focuses more on how the freeman's oath was used to empower and resist claims of authority. Liddy regards the oath as a 'disruptive and animating force' (p. 50), which valued 'fraternity and equality' among the citizenry.

The physical make-up of the city was integral to notions of civic authority. Chapter three looks at how the

privileges of citizenship were bound up with conceptions about urban space and its boundaries, which animated ideas of hierarchy, solidarity, contestation and community. The ritual perambulation of 'riding the franchise' (or 'riding the bounds') was a common means of reinforcing physical reminders about urban jurisdictional limits, often at times of civic elections. Liddy examines a number of ways in which urban space was defined and transgressed, through encroachments in the streets, the extent of religious precincts, and enclosure of common land. Again, the focus is as much on the actions of ordinary citizens as on assertions of power by the civic elite. Citizens might communally resist unlawful encroachments by individuals upon what was considered the common soil. Such 'purprestures' were viewed as an infringement upon citizens' rights and the public interest. How much this was purely an issue for citizens rather than 'neighbours' more generally is only touched upon. Nevertheless, glimpses into developing practices of collective action are illuminating, highlighting how public authority was appropriated, such as the use of bill-casting upon garden gates which hinted at the threat of violence against offenders. Liddy presents such challenges as part of a broader struggle between individual rights and communal principles, which were regularly played out in medieval English towns – a 'participatory model of citizenship' (p. 66) where citizens themselves asserted their shared rights. This is a running theme throughout the book, that the citizens promoted a corporatist ideology, sometimes in defiance of civic officials. This argument is developed most fully in the section on urban enclosure of commons, which rightly deserves more attention in the historiography. Extra- and intra-mural enclosure could lead to hostility and riots, as it offended a strong sense of long-held corporate rights. Liddy discusses the riotous processions in late medieval Coventry, where 'tearing-down of enclosures was a public act' (p. 84) akin to civic ceremonial.

Chapter four highlights other less violent ways in which the collectivity of citizenship was fostered, such as bell-ringing that would draw together public assemblies. The civic calendar reminded citizens of the transient nature of urban office-holding, with annual elections denoting a renewal of political consensus. Civic ideals would be reiterated, while checks and oaths were made. As other historians have recognised, the core councillors often held their position for life, but the annual cycle of civic ritual reminded them of their duties and the rights of the wider citizenry. Liddy is also keen to stress that such ceremonial may have been intended to ensure legitimation and obedience, but it actually reinforced systematic frictions by acting as a focal point for disputes. There are numerous such instances presented from Norwich and London, but as previously Liddy seeks to downplay elite faction-fighting and instead emphasise the 'collective agency of citizens' (p. 95). In this interpretation, Ralph Holland's advocacy of a wider civic franchise is an example of ongoing structural conflict rather than a radical exception.

Liddy brings to the fore a sense of the vigour and audibility of medieval civic politics. Despite efforts to reduce their involvement, the wider citizenry were keen to speak and actively engage; they were not as pliable and obedient as the ceremonial imagery (such as Ricart's *Kalendar*) might suggest. The 'annual election was a great leveller' (p. 118), publicly reminding citizens of the impermanence of office and thus encouraging calls for accountability. Much attention is given to the civic oaths and oath-taking, which reminded all of their responsibilities and bonds of obedience, but also that the public audience was a source of authority.

'The exercise of political power in late medieval English towns was predicated upon the representation, management, and control of public opinion' (p. 130). Liddy argues that there were various ways in which local public opinion was expressed, from the official pronouncements of the council and ceremonial to negotiations, social interactions and gossip. However, the latter were not especially amenable to control by the civic authorities and could be disruptive, such as with the supposedly seditious bills circulating in London in 1453 and in Coventry in both 1495–6 and 1525. Even the relationship between civic officials and craft guilds was about dialogue and negotiation, but the guilds were seen as potential havens of subversive ideas. Chapter five focuses on the public nature of urban government and how both authority and criticism was communicated. The spaces of the town hall, marketplace, street, and craft assemblies provided venues for public opinion and proclamations to be shared. The importance of communication for urban politics is clear.

Chapter six concentrates on the numerous, written constitutions, which were often both the product and

cause of tension. The checks and balances included in these civic documents reminded citizens that urban authority was not absolute. The Wells constitution of 1437 encompassed an agreement and consensus between various groups, thus seeking to provide a means of reconciliation between citizens. Other historians, such as Steve Rigby, have commented on the extent of conflict caused by disagreement over popular participation in urban governance.⁽³⁾ Liddy argues that the written constitutions were ‘an attempt to resolve these tensions within citizenship’ (p. 183), but that they also caused conflict, such as the London 1319 ‘Constitutions’. A nice touch here is Liddy’s examination of the seal bag and its representation of St Paul and Edward the Confessor as part of the sacred nature of the bond. What is reiterated throughout this book is that the very understanding of the notion of citizenship was contested. Attempts to allay tensions often merely caused new ambiguities and reframed the terms of debate. Written constitutions and oaths thus became foci of citizen claims.

Overall, what we see in Liddy’s insightful analysis is that beneath the attempts to present civic harmony and consensus, there were various sites where political life was contentious and where citizens could express their dissatisfaction. The more well-known examples of Ralph Holland in London and Lawrence Saunders in Coventry exemplify differing ideas that were circulating regarding authority, constituency and elections. Liddy asks whether they were the exception or representative of a multiplicity of views. What is fascinating is the extent to which the very notion of citizenship was widely debated, malleable and varied, and differing perspectives were advanced to legitimise actions. Although there were underlying points about rights and responsibilities, Liddy argues convincingly for an ‘inherently unstable ideology of urban citizenship’ (p. 206) that could lead to various forms of political conflict.

Notes

1. S. Rigby, ‘Urban “oligarchy” in late medieval England’, in *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. J. A. F. Thomson (Gloucester, 1988), pp. 62–86.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. P. Lantschner, *The Logic of Political Conflict in Medieval Cities: Italy and the Southern Low Countries, 1370–1440* (Oxford, 2015).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Rigby, ‘Urban “oligarchy”’, pp. 65–70.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/294809>